

EDITORIAL

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29 Road question hinges on trust in government

Competing narratives on the bonding question to create an interchange at 29 Road and Interstate 70 have left this editorial board in a state of perplexity.

Certainly we like the stated intent of the project — to simultaneously address future congestion, improve traffic flow, facilitate easier movement of people and goods across the valley's urban center and open up new avenues for development. It's a vision a long time in the making.

We've often reminded readers that this community has been transformed by a combination of vision and investment. Whether it's the Riverside Parkway, developing the riverfront or the new Grand Junction High School, nothing has materialized without some debate about the return on investment.

And that's where this project is especially nettlesome. Opponents say there is no return — that it's an expensive boondoggle that won't solve transportation issues and will crowd out funding for other capital priorities in the valley. These objections have appeared numerous times on these editorial pages.

Meanwhile supporters — spearheaded by Grand Junction City Council Member Cody Kennedy and Mesa County Commissioner Cody Davis — have stressed that the vote on the bonding question is merely a necessary first step to deliver an affordable plan that will improve traffic safety and traffic flow.

In essence, they say the authorization to borrow up to \$80 million is needed to explore other sources of funding — though our municipalities are prepared to self-fund the entire project if it comes to that. And it all depends on approval from the Colorado Department of Transportation.

“We can continue to refine and make the design better,” Davis said. “I'm confident we'll get CDOT's approval for this project.”

Approval of a plan that hits acceptable safety metrics will largely determine project costs. If, for example, CDOT's approval hinges on inclusion of a “braided lane” to reduce the potential for crashes, that extra cost could scuttle the project — unless the bond authorization can serve as a show of “skin in the game” to qualify for state or federal grants that could make up the difference.

Approval of a too-expensive project doesn't obligate the county to issue bonds.

“Even if we get it approved, it's not like we're just going to say, ‘Hey, we're just going to keep spending money,’” Kennedy said. “It has to make sense.”

We urge a yes vote on Mesa County Ballot Issue 1A. Authorizing \$80 million in debt is not the same as spending the money, though we recognize that some voters will see this as a distinction without a difference. Needless to say, a yes vote is a show of trust that our elected officials will do right by

the community and deliver a project within the prescribed fiscal parameters that improves traffic flow without compromising safety.

This project has been besieged by contradictory statements — from the number of condemnations required to various interpretations of a traffic study to the impact on the city's capital budget.

But no matter the arguments for and against the project, at heart is a simple issue. Voters are being asked to play their constitutional role, as mandated by the Taxpayer Bill of Rights, to give local government officials authority to issue debt — if, in their wisdom, the project makes financial sense.

We can't all be experts. But we can look at history and be assured that similar investments in transportation have contributed to growth in economic activity and population — the latter to the degree that it's time to consider further improvements.

We say allow our elected officials to make a wise determination about whether the debt should be issued.

And if they make a bad decision, vote their asses out of office.